



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Emil
Bisttram, 1963 October 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Emil Bisttram on October 17, 1963. The interview took place in Taos, New Mexico, and was conducted by Sylvia Glidden Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview by a representative of the Santa Fe Office of the Archives of American Art, with Mr. Emil Bisttram at his studio in Taos, New Mexico on October 17th, 1963. The particular phase of American art to be emphasized is that of the Federal Art Projects during the 1930s and '40s. As you are one of the artists involved in this work, Mr. Bisttram, we would like to ask you some questions about it and about yourself, and record any comments you might wish to make. First, would you tell us something about yourself? Where you were born, when you came to New Mexico and to Taos.

EMIL BISTTRAM: I was born in Austria, Hungary, April 7th, 1895. I came to this country in 1906, and resided in New York up until 1930, when I came to Taos as a visitor, returned, and—that is to New York, and returned to Taos in 1931 on a Guggenheim Fellowship.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All right.

EMIL BISTTRAM: And liked it so well that we remained in Taos ever since.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was the Taos art colony like in those days?

EMIL BISTTRAM: There were about 15 or 16 artists who were nationally known for their painting of the West, Indian and the landscape of this part of the country, but primarily Indian painters.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

EMIL BISTTRAM: I was one of the first Moderns to come to Taos and disturb this community very much. However—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How did you do that?

EMIL BISTTRAM: By—they asked me to lecture here, as a Guggenheim Fellowship, on color and design and I became an abstractionist and non-objectivist while in this part of the country, while I came here. And, of course, it did bother the old timers who were making a very good living through their reputation of painting Indians and similar subject matter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who were some of those artists? Do you remember?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Ah, was Sharp and Couse, Ufer, Dunton, Blumenschein—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Phillips?

EMIL BISTTRAM: —Phillips, Kenneth Adams, and a number of other, lesser men, but those were the leaders of the Taos art group.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, and now this was just a little while then before the Federal Art Projects were started?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I wonder if you would tell us something about the first Federal Art Project in this area?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, the first one dealt with, as I said before, with artists who needed some help, financial help, and they were asked to—they themselves asked to be on this Project. And as I recall, they were getting \$56 a month and had to paint one painting a week and send it to Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, this was the first—the first Project?

EMIL BISTTRAM: That was the first Project, yes. And we did that until it ended, I don't recall now how long it lasted. I know that there was a great deal of commotion amongst the artists, they weren't satisfied at all with the Project and it—with the result that they were less and less interested in painting for the Project, rather going behind the shelves and in the piles of the discarded paintings and sending one of those. And I was one who was collecting that material and sending it to Washington, I agreed with the artists and I did not object, although they asked me to be sure that they painted each one for this special occasion. However, if the artist didn't paint that week, I didn't say a word, I simply took one of the canvases that they gave me and sent it. They didn't know the difference anyway.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was this under the direction of Mr. Bruce or was this—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, that was the first.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The first one, mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was your work during the— during that time? What type of work did you do?

[00:05:05]

EMIL BISTTRAM: It was realistic, it was Indians and landscapes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Your own work?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you said that you also did supervisory work, is that right?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. How were you selected for that?

EMIL BISTTRAM: The artists themselves, when they were asked to select a leader or a supervisor, they selected me as their supervisor.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Now, the next project, which was the, I think, the PWAP, the one that —

EMIL BISTTRAM: Where the murals came in.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, the murals came in. I wonder if you would tell us about that?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, we wanted to do murals in the fresco medium. I have been in Mexico, studied with Rivera, and was doing frescos down there with him, and I was very anxious to do some here and have the opportunity to work on a large scale. And the other men also were anxious, though none of them had done any of it, we all learned, some from books and some from me, as to how this was done, and we went and got the project in the Taos courthouse.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who were the other men associated with you?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Ward Lockwood, Phillips, and Higgins, and myself were the four artists who were chosen to do this work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you were called the Fresco Quartet, was that correct?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How long did this work go on?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, it was—it ended there, as far as Taos was concerned, however we were given other projects. I did one for Roswell, for the Roswell courthouse in oil, and I also

did another for Ranger, Texas.

MARY BISTTRAM: These were competitions?

EMIL BISTTRAM: No, they were not competitions, those were not competitions, they were specific problems given to you, you have a mural here to do for Roswell and you have one for Ranger, Texas. The competition was for the national mural in the Justice Building.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

EMIL BISTTRAM: And that one I won, Justice for Women [*Contemporary Justice and Woman*]. I won that in that national competition.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And this was also under—this under WPA auspices, or this was the—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, yes, yes, this was all part of the same program. We received, as I say, very little for our work here, we had to pay for everything out of our own pocket. We did get, we thought was a lot of money, \$2,500—at least I did, for the mural in Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes.

EMIL BISTTRAM: And it took me practically nine months to do it, and then had to go to Washington and put it on the wall, all for \$2,500, which is what, eight feet by 12 feet, or almost 14 feet, you see. So—but then, of course, in those days \$2,500 seemed like a lot of money. Today I wouldn't do any of it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do a one of it, mm-mm [negative]. Month's work, part of this.

EMIL BISTTRAM: You see, that's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, the—as I understood it there was a break between the PWAP, which was the Public Works Project and the Federal Art Project, which came on in 1935. Was this the later mural that you're just speaking about in this competition, was that done under the WPA, the later one under Vernon Hunter, do you remember?

EMIL BISTTRAM: I had nothing to do with Vernon Hunter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You didn't?

EMIL BISTTRAM: No, I never even saw him, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right? Well now I understood that he was the one that took over the supervision of the Art Project—Federal Art Project after—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, he did but I don't think that any of us worked with him or did anything. Who the men were that he was working with, I don't know. I never worked with him.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, do you know what year this was?

EMIL BISTTRAM: I don't.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember, Mrs. Bisttram?

MARY BISTTRAM: No, I don't remember that at all. It seems to me I have a vague recollection that perhaps Vernon Hunter was the clean-up man.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MARY BISTTRAM: I mean, they were—they were—they were closing out, you see, these different projects that had been started months and months before, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY BISTTRAM: And he was supervising that. I believe that was the last, which was probably, I don't know—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, he was—

MARY BISTTRAM: WPA or PWA.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was WPA.

MARY BISTTRAM: WPA.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And his dates were from 1935 to 1942, when it closed.

[00:10:00]

MARY BISTTRAM: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I have established that.

MARY BISTTRAM: Uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And so, that if there—if you did any work from the better part of—

MARY BISTTRAM: I don't think I did any work in—during that period.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

EMIL BISTTRAM: I didn't—never worked with Hunter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, so that probably was all during this earlier period.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that at least helps to pinpoint it, if that isn't what—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY BISTTRAM: I believe that the mimeographed bulletins that we are giving you will give you much of that information.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Fine.

MARY BISTTRAM: You will be able to crosscheck because it's quite vague in our minds.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yeah, well it's such a long time ago that it would be difficult to remember.

MARY BISTTRAM: Yeah. It was a dead and buried proposition [ph] long ago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, and a great many people do feel that way about it, and that's why it's so valuable to have any—any of your recollections on it. Now, do you—there were you to—have spoken about this mural that you did with the Fresco Quartet at the Taos courthouse, and this other one that you did for the competition in Washington. Were there any other murals that you did under these auspices?

EMIL BISTTRAM: No, there are only four altogether.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Four altogether.

EMIL BISTTRAM: The one that was the national competition, Justice for Women [*Contemporary Justice and Woman*], one for Roswell in the courthouse, which was also a very large one, and there are a smaller one on in Ranger, Texas post office. That was the period when they were decorating post offices.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I remember hearing about that, mm-hmm [affirmative].

EMIL BISTTRAM: So, that—I did one, but I refused to do any more because they wanted—my letters from Washington stated that I must go to Ranger to find out what the Chamber of Commerce and the Lions Club would like me to put up there. Well, what do they know about art, so they wanted it to have something to do with potash or the potato fields, and I refused to do that, and then they said, Well, why don't you try to do something about Ranger, Texas. And, well what is Ranger known for? Well, this is where the rangers were, so I painted a

number of horses standing before the post office and the cowboys reading their letters. And that, they were satisfied with. Well, it was not the kind of a thing I was interested in painting, but I had to do it and I said I—well, I won't do another one.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

EMIL BISTTRAM: If I have to go and do local stories, illustrations for the lay people of that particular town, it doesn't raise them a one iota from the level that they always have been on.

MARY BISTTRAM: Actually, I think a good bit of the struggle in the later years of the program was pretty much along the lines of that Mr. Bisttram has indicated, that the more thoughtful and more serious artist wanted to do the kind of art that was symbolic and more idealistic than the purely documentary type of thing, which was dull and not too interesting. It might appeal to the people of that particular area because perhaps the artist could catch—capture something of value, you know. But the more serious artist was reaching out, I think, for a chance to do something that he would be proud of in time, and that would help to immortalize him, especially on the walls that he was given. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes, well I imagine certainly that he would want to do some experimental work—

MARY BISTTRAM: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —or to do something different from what has always been done, and that was the period in which the artists were reaching out for new techniques and new art forms and so for.

MARY BISTTRAM: And, of course, there was also the problem that a great many of the artists in, we'll say, areas that were very social-conscious, were producing paintings that became known as socialistic and communistic type of paintings, even in those days.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, because the struggle was between labor and capital and starvation and so the artist is very sensitive to those things, and he portrayed them and of course our good congressmen didn't like it, and that was the end—really the reason for the end of this program, because too many artists are—they're idealists, they're humanitarians. And they began to express themselves, and they didn't want it. They wanted—just paint us the subject of—

MARY BISTTRAM: Safe subject matter.

EMIL BISTTRAM: You know, the potash, we want you to paint the potash mines.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Or calendar-type art.

MARY BISTTRAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative], that's right.

EMIL BISTTRAM: So.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, what you said that there were these three other men who worked with you on this—the Taos courthouse mural. And how did—how was that work organized?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, each one selected a subject.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

[00:15:01]

EMIL BISTTRAM: Since it's a courthouse, we dealt with—

MARY BISTTRAM: Law.

EMIL BISTTRAM: —law, education, religion. What else? Good and evil. You see what I mean?

MARY BISTTRAM: Well, the central panel over the judge's dais is of Moses.

EMIL BISTTRAM: And the 10 Commandments.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yeah.

MARY BISTTRAM: And the tablets, you see. And of course, that is indicated as the beginning of law for our particular Western civilization.

EMIL BISTTRAM: And then the other panels deal with greed, avarice, and good and evil. That sort of thing.

MARY BISTTRAM: Temptation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then—so, each artist took one of these subjects—

EMIL BISTTRAM: One of these subjects, we talked it over and we decided, all right, you want that, you can do—and I'll do this and—I had two panels, Victor Higgins had one, a large one, and—

MARY BISTTRAM: Lockwood had two, and Phillips—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Lockwood had two, and I think Phillips had two.

MARY BISTTRAM: Phillips had two.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And how did you coordinate your composition, so that it all—so that all balanced?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, we didn't do very much coordinating, but it worked out very well because, after all, the size of the panel immediately suggests full figures at the full length and the height and so forth and so on, and they all worked out exactly the same. I mean they almost looked as though the same person did them, except technically the strokes are different and the handling was different, but they are all full figures and taking up the space completely.

MARY BISTTRAM: They were done right on the wall, weren't they?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Oh yes, frescos are done on a wall.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What effect do you think that this work had on your own work as an artist?

EMIL BISTTRAM: We had—that had no effect whatever, it was a passing experience and of little value except to experiment in fresco and that was the end of that. And if we would have had the opportunity to paint 10 or 15 or 20 of them, perhaps it would have some effect, because you might have had the greater experience in handling fresco, also in the freedom of expression would have been greater. We were limited, for the time being, and was very short and that was the end of it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then the fact that you were not allowed to experiment—

MARY BISTTRAM: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —in new techniques, or new forms, then it didn't—

EMIL BISTTRAM: No, they weren't—they weren't in favor of any of that at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What effect do you think that this had on the art colony at Taos, in general?

EMIL BISTTRAM: I don't think it affected the art colony at all. That was, as I said before, a period of hardship and it was simply a means of crossing the bridge of this period, but it had no effect on the artists' work at all, as far as Taos was concerned.

MARY BISTTRAM: Now I don't think that the encouragement that was received, following the initiation of the program was enough to keep the artists stimulated and fired, his imagination fired to demand an opportunity for greater creativity.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Let's assume that we did these frescos now, and all the other artists who were around would say—looked at them and wished that they could do some. There was no opportunity, therefore it died.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

EMIL BISTTRAM: So, there was no influence, you see. If they would all have the opportunity, on their own or some other way, to do some of this work, perhaps then you could say that Taos went wild over frescoes and it did a whole number of them. Or in a certain style, a direction, because of these frescoes.

MARY BISTTRAM: However, I do think—

EMIL BISTTRAM: There wasn't very much.

MARY BISTTRAM: —there were some areas in the nation where the wall decorations that were done did have an effect upon the artists.

EMIL BISTTRAM: New York. New York, where there a great deal of it was done, and—

MARY BISTTRAM: Los Angeles.

EMIL BISTTRAM: You know, and Los Angeles, and in larger cities where 1,000 artists, we'll say, were working. Well, there you had something to look at, you saw what they were doing and each one was different, you know, each one was striving to say something. It was very limited for us here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now these paintings that you spoke of before that were sent to Washington, you know, for approval?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wonder if you would enlarge on that a little more, I mean, as far as the—

EMIL BISTTRAM: We—we objected to it very much. For the simple reason that they would accept, and they wanted only representational material.

[00:20:11]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you said they judged it from—on a different basis from—

EMIL BISTTRAM: They judged it from the Eastern viewpoint, not realizing that our viewpoint was totally different because of the—our surroundings, because of the atmosphere, the light, the color, and also the desire for experimentation of a few of us who were interested in experimenting. That was completely shut out. We weren't allowed to do that. In other words, the sketches we sent in, were—were never okayed or anything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative].

EMIL BISTTRAM: And the paintings that we sent in was, I said, simply paintings that we slapped out, did something, simply to get over with it and that was it.

MARY BISTTRAM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I think as time went on, towards the end of the program again, there seems to be fresher in my mind than the beginnings. There was a feeling that the artist was expected to give a very fine painting which had a higher market value, than he was getting as a, we'll say, a wage, a stipend, or what have you. So, there was some feeling about that too, and I do believe that it influenced quite a few artists in their attitude towards their own work that they were producing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Lowered the standard.

MARY BISTTRAM: It lowered the standard, that was the big rub, you see. They began to say, Well, here are these thousands of artists expected to give their very best, you see, and producing fine works of art which in a normal market would get anywhere from \$2[00] to \$300 and perhaps even more.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, they were getting—you know it—we know what the boys were getting here, \$500 to \$1,000 a painting. And let's say those of us who are newcomers to Taos, would only get \$300 or \$400, you see, for a painting. Well now, when they expect you to paint one and deliver one a week, for \$56 a month, that's four paintings for \$56 and you had to buy your paints and canvases, you know how we felt.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, of course. Well, now how did they feel in relation to the fact that there

was a depression, and that—and, I suppose they had—the bottom had sort of dropped out of the art market to some extent hadn't it?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I mean—but you feel that this was overshadowed—

MARY BISTTRAM: I think they were a little bit afraid that it might establish a precedent.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY BISTTRAM: And that it would eventually have an influence detrimental to the artist. Because, you see, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of paintings were being collected by the federal government, put into institutions, put into all sorts of buildings and goodness knows where they—

EMIL BISTTRAM: All the offices in Washington at that time were decorated with these paintings.

MARY BISTTRAM: So, that the question came into the minds, yes, we are being helped during this depression, but what is going to be the end result, with all these paintings, you see, and how—is this impression—this depression, is it going to continue, as far as we're concerned, because once the federal government pulls out its support, then, with the market saturated with paintings, what chances will we have to again sell?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, I think that was something that I was leading towards when I asked about the effect that these Projects had, you see, whether it did depress the market, or whether it aroused interest enough so to offset that?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well it depressed—well, I think it depressed it in one sense, but aroused sufficient interest among the lay public to be art conscious and in time the lay public has made up by buying, or becoming interested in buying minor works, lesser works, you see, but slowly getting better works and so on. Which, before that, it wasn't so. Only the monied people came to this town. Who? Like the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts and the Morgans and the collectors-type, you see. And they would be entertained by the artist and that was a big—some here in Taos and in Santa Fe, and they came to this wild country and were entertained by the artists and they would go home, buy two or three paintings for \$5[00] or \$800, you see. And that was the market at that time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

[00:24:55]

EMIL BISTTRAM: And it was limited to that few—the few, Phillips and Couse who made a fortune, and Dunton, who made out very well, and so did Ufer, and that sort of a thing happened, you see. Well now, this project awakened the lay public to it, rather than the cultured, so called, group, the monied group who think they're cultured because they have money, and buy, you see. So, in that way it did help.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Indirectly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Indirectly, mm-hmm [affirmative], by just getting people more interested in art in general. [Cross talk.]

EMIL BISTTRAM: Indirectly it helped. Yes, that's right. Yes.

MARY BISTTRAM: Well, it—the fact that public buildings had these wall paintings and murals and hangings that were made by the artists on the program, the lay public going into a public building couldn't help but see them. So, their eye became a sort of conditioned by a picture or a design and as Mr. Bisttram just said, as time went on, they did take more of an interest. I think percentage has grown enormously through the years, of art buyers. And I believe, and so does Mr. Bisttram too, that this is the result of that program that was initiated during the depression years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, the next question I have here is what contribution do you think these

Projects had on art as a whole in the United States. Perhaps—

EMIL BISTTRAM: I don't think they contributed anything to art.

MARY BISTTRAM: [Inaudible.]

EMIL BISTTRAM: The art consciousness has occurred in spite of the limitations of the Project. We don't understand how these things occur, but a wave of art spirit, you might say, penetrated the consciousness of humanity and the artist caught this intuitively in terms of the desire to create an original work rather than the imitation of the past type of a thing. The literal, the representational, and the academic sort of Renaissance-y, and so forth. All of a sudden, this thing started—actually it began with the Armory Show, that is, for this country. Of course, it was going on since 1906 in Europe, but it took that long for the wave to hit the United States. So, you see, it had nothing to do with the Art Project, it was this wave of creativity from Europe which went all over the world. It's in China, it's in Japan, and it's in South America, it's in every country in the world is doing modern art, no matter how the lay public objects to it or says it doesn't understand it, it is going on just the same because you cannot stop the artist from expressing himself in the creative sense.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MARY BISTTRAM: There were some examples of it under this government project, certain areas. Didn't Macdonald-Wright, in Los Angeles, work in that direction?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, they worked in that direction in New York too, but very limited, it wasn't at all modern art as we know it today.

MARY BISTTRAM: Oh no.

EMIL BISTTRAM: It was a—designed more, if you—if you know what I mean. But the subject matter was still there, you see. They weren't accepting anything—you see, it didn't start, modern art, actually in this country, there were maybe five or 10 artists doing a little of it. But it actually hit New York about 1936,'37, and then in 1940 it was beginning to be strong. And from 1940 to the present time you have the avant-garde thing, it was at 10th Street School, and it was in California and San Francisco at the same time, and it seemed to be just—come up like mushrooms, you know. All the same.

MARY BISTTRAM: Yes, and I've always had the opinion that Taos artists were more individual than the artists in large cities.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, they're more isolated, you see, and see less, although today, they see just as much because the same magazines go to each town, and each library has them, so that the artists are influenced by what they see. You know, Picasso said very aptly that the painter copies nature, the artist steals.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] Oh, steals instead of interprets, huh?

[00:30:00]

EMIL BISTTRAM: Because he sees what's going on. I always ask the question, would these people who are doing modern art today, do modern art if they didn't see it?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's an interesting question, because—so—

EMIL BISTTRAM: You see? That's something else again, it is because this is what's being done, so he's going to do it. But would you do it?

MARY BISTTRAM: But there is also another factor, I think, comes into the argument, and that is that realistic or documentary painting doesn't seem to fire the imagination. Whereas the work that has been done by the leaders in the Modern Art movement, has a terrific stimulus and the imagination—the created imagination of the artist is challenged by it, and so he's confident that he can do it, and he goes home, and he does it. Perhaps that's what Picasso meant by stealing.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, he meant more than that. He meant exactly what I meant by it, that you can have an exhibition of avant-garde and you'd swear that they lived in the same building, you see. Because they're all pushing it with a broom, or all spilling it with—out of

the same can and using the same size brushes that's got to be that wide now and it's got to be free. And it's either black and white or raw as pigment can be, you see. I mean, it depends on which way his temperament goes, but they kind of look over the shoulder of the other one, you see. And that's what happens.

MARY BISTTRAM: But isn't that historically true?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, it is, because the same thing occurred in Renaissance during Michelangelo's time and Rafael's time, they all began to paint like Rafael, or they tried to imitate Michelangelo, or whatever it was, you see. So, they became a school.

MARY BISTTRAM: Yes, and then the Modern movement, the Cubism and the Impressionist—
[Cross talk.]

EMIL BISTTRAM: It's a school, the same thing—the same thing, so that's what he meant by stealing, you see. You wouldn't have done it if you didn't see it.

MARY BISTTRAM: Well, then he meant you steal from the other artists, I thought you meant steal from nature.

EMIL BISTTRAM: No, no, from other artists, you see because Picasso, if you study Picasso, [cross talk] you'll find that he can go to a museum and see something done in the Etruscan period and go home and paint 10 of them in that manner but make it Picasso. And you say he's original. But he steals constantly, but he's clever, he's strong, and he makes it a Picasso.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well that has been a feeling I've had about so many so-called modern artists, that they have just stolen from somebody else and to see an original American painter is such a relief to me, if you remember, and there were so few that you could say if he has something unique, so often that you could see the influence—very strong influence of some well-known artist.

EMIL BISTTRAM: A good example of it now, suppose we only saw one artist who was doing Pop art, Pop art. You'd say he was original; he was quite different, you see. But now you have 100 of them doing it. Why didn't he do it before?

MARY BISTTRAM: I know, he was obviously influenced.

EMIL BISTTRAM: You see? Oh, excuse me, I got to—I got to shut that off for a minute.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, the final question is this one. If the federal government were to attempt another subsidy of the arts, what form do you think it should take?

EMIL BISTTRAM: I should think that the best form—the best thing for the government would be—to do, would be to encourage the public to be more art conscious and to arrange exhibitions for artists in museums, in public buildings, or wherever possible, but the government to take on the project of art encouragement for public use. All buildings should be decorated, but not by government support, but by public support. And the artist should not be supported in any other way, he must be left free to produce and to create and to sell his work according to its quality and his ability to produce the best. But to let the institutions, the business houses, and the public in general become art conscious.

[00:35:00]

That is where they should have an art portfolio where it would—like France does. France does it, you see. They don't pay any artist anything, they live in garrets and all sorts of things, but they create, because France publicizes art, creates an interest in art. It does it—it is an alive part of the body politic of that nation, while here it is not.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, it would not be financial subsidy?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Not—I would never—I don't think it's any good. It gets into politics, it gets into all sorts of things, it should be much more impersonal and definitely on a large scale of creating such a ruckus about art, a great interest by having large exhibitions and exhibitions and more exhibitions to get the public to go see. When you think of a million and a half people seeing a Van Gogh show, see? There's nothing else—publicity. Nothing else but pushing the thing and that's what we need more than anything else. I don't want any

support; no artist wants the support. They fall asleep on the job, because before you know it, they are asked to follow a certain direction for the money. Mm-mm [negative], you can't do it. Politicians always get in there and begin to say—I don't care who you select as the one to judge, he's bound to be biased, it's bound to be personal, no one can be that big, to be able to look at the four corners of the United States and say this is good and that's good and that's not good.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what do you think about the juried shows at the museum in Santa Fe, the New Mexico museum art gallery?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In a way that—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Again, it's a matter of the jury you select. Depends on the jury and the word goes out in a strange way that we'd like to have more representational art this year than—

MARY BISTTRAM: Abstract.

EMIL BISTTRAM: —abstract, you see, so that's what happens. Again, even the little sneaky word gets in there and the jury begins to think in those terms, or the jury's selected because his tendency is to select a direction. They can't afford to pay good men, you know, he has to come from over there or over there or over there. And so, they get one man to do it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, would you approve of the old policy of the open door?

EMIL BISTTRAM: No, I don't think that's any good at all. I think that's everybody gets in and you've got nothing. After all, the artist feels that he is producing something, he is exclusive in that sense. He wants to be with the best and let him compete for the best.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, how would you set your standards then?

EMIL BISTTRAM: The only way is the jury, there's no way out of it. The jury is the only one to select, but you've got to watch the jury. There ought to be, instead of museum directors always being on juries, you see, there ought to be more artists on juries. They are the ones who paint, they are the know—the ones who know what the artists are striving for. You select artists who are in the know, you select them because they know what is going on in the world of art. They have a background, they are recognized as intelligent, creative men, not just artists who paint, there's a lot of difference.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, would you approve of having artists select a jewelry—a jury?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That would be the best way then, to have the artists selecting themselves?

EMIL BISTTRAM: Yes, yes, artists selecting the jury rather than the museum directors and then always having the museum director, or two of them, and an artist, and they always outvote you, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MARY BISTTRAM: Course, there is a trend in many of these competitive and juried shows, to—to get the novel thing. The painting that is going to be controversial, that is going to attract attention, and that is going to establish a new trend so that in the long run these competitive exhibitions, which they are, have a tendency to emphasize false standards in art. We have lost a yardstick for measuring what is fine in art, you see.

EMIL BISTTRAM: We have no standards, there are no standards, no use.

[00:39:58]

MARY BISTTRAM: And Mr. Bisttram's point, that he felt that if arts were put on juries and not art museum directors who are inclined to favor calling attention to their institutions, and to themselves too, by the quixotic—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Use of novelty material, like turning a picture upside down, purposely, you see, and having it photographed and made a lot of noise of, and then the artist kicks about it, then the other artists kick about it. Well, that creates a noise so that everybody has to go look at this picture that was hung upside down.

MARY BISTTRAM: Brings the crowd.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Or, this picture that won the award in California, you know the child, four years old or whatever it was, it was interesting scribble that looked like a chicken scratches, so everybody in the United States knows about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, and it gives the art a bad name, and it gives the real artists—

MARY BISTTRAM: [Cross talk.] It's not art, it's a novelty

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well sure, there's no judgement there, it was done purposefully, that fellow Black is the one who did it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I remember that controversy.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Well, he was, he's a smarty.

MARY BISTTRAM: Well, and then another thing—

EMIL BISTTRAM: Honey, I'm going to run along, you don't need me anymore, do you?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I just wondered if there were any little personal comments that you would like to make, you know, in relation to your work on the Projects. This is—we talked about your—the—your artwork, but I wondered if there was anything more personal that you would like to say.

EMIL BISTTRAM: I don't know of anything to say. It was interesting to work with the artists, and to help them as much as we could. We helped each other and it was a fine thing, for the time it went on.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, thank you very much—

EMIL BISTTRAM: You're welcome.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: — for this interview and thank you, Mrs. Bisttram too.

MARY BISTTRAM: Not at all.

EMIL BISTTRAM: And I think you'll find something in there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And we'll have these—[cross talk] we're very grateful to have all of these records too.

EMIL BISTTRAM: Okay, I'm going to run along—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]